

WEAPONS AND VIOLENCE

Context

Concern has grown recently around juvenile violence and criminal activity. Analysis from the Wisconsin Statistical Analysis Center (Eversen, et. al., 1999) reveals that juvenile arrests rates¹ for violent offenses² have increased by 89 percent between 1988 and 1998. However, juvenile arrest rates for violent offenses peaked in 1994 and have decreased every year between 1994 and 1999 (Eversen, et. al., 1999). By comparison, adult arrests for the same crimes increased by 30 percent. Juvenile arrests for all crimes have grown by 61 percent, compared to 41 percent for adults, between 1988 and 1998. This rate has increased in every year but the last. This is a trend that is reflected nationally as well. The U.S. Department of Justice (1998) reports that on the national level the juvenile violent crime arrest rate in 1997 was 49 percent above the 1988 level, while the comparable adult violent crime arrest rate was 19 percent above 1988 levels. However, there is evidence that the crime rates for both populations has begun to level off in recent years. Interestingly, most parents were not worried at all about their child committing a crime and nearly all were nearly certain that their child does not break the law (Bogenschneider, Tsay & Wu, 1996).

Approximately nine out of ten homicide victims in the United States are killed with a weapon such as a gun, knife, or club. Homicide is the second leading cause of death among young adults aged 15 to 24 years and third for those aged 5 to 14 years in the United States and the leading killer of black adolescents and young adults (National Center for Health Statistics, 1999). Of the 2,100 juveniles murdered in 1997, 56% were killed with a firearm (U.S. Department of Justice, 1998). In addition, fighting is the most important antecedent behavior for a great proportion of homicides among adolescents (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 1990).

While violence at school continues to be a concern due to recent national events, students are much more likely to be victims of serious violent crime away from school rather than at school (Department of Education, 1998). Since 1993, the overall crime rate for students ages 12-18 declined, as did rates of crime outside of school for this group (Department of Education, 1998).

For this survey, a series of questions was asked to determine students' risk of violence or accidental injury involving weapons. A set of questions asked how often students carry weapons and whether they carry weapons onto school property. A second set of questions asked about the effects of threats of violence to the school environment including the extent to which students had been involved in physical fights.

Highlights

- The proportion of students carrying weapons on school grounds decreased significantly since 1993, from nine to six percent. This decrease is largely due to male students carrying weapons at school, which decreased from 15 to 8 percent.
- The percentage of students who reported being in a fight both anywhere and on school property decreased significantly between 1993 and 1999.

¹ The arrest rate is the number of arrests per 100,000 residents. This proportion controls for the effects of varying populations from year to year allowing for comparison of arrests on a standardized population basis.

² Violent offenses are defined as murder, forcible rape, robbery, and aggravated assault

- Four percent of students reported that they had stayed home at least one day in the past 12 months because they felt unsafe either going to school or while at school.
- Students in Wisconsin are significantly less likely to report being in a physical fight on school property than the national average.
- About one in ten students reported being threatened because of their race in the past year. One in twenty students reported being threatened because someone thought they were lesbian, gay or bisexual.
- One third of all students reported being in a physical fight anywhere, while one in ten reported being in a physical fight on school property in the past 12 months. Male students had a significantly higher prevalence rate on nearly every measure of violence and weapon usage.
- Ten percent of students report ever having been verbally or physically forced to take part in sexual activity.
- About four in ten female students report ever having been sexually harassed at school.

General Prevalence Rates

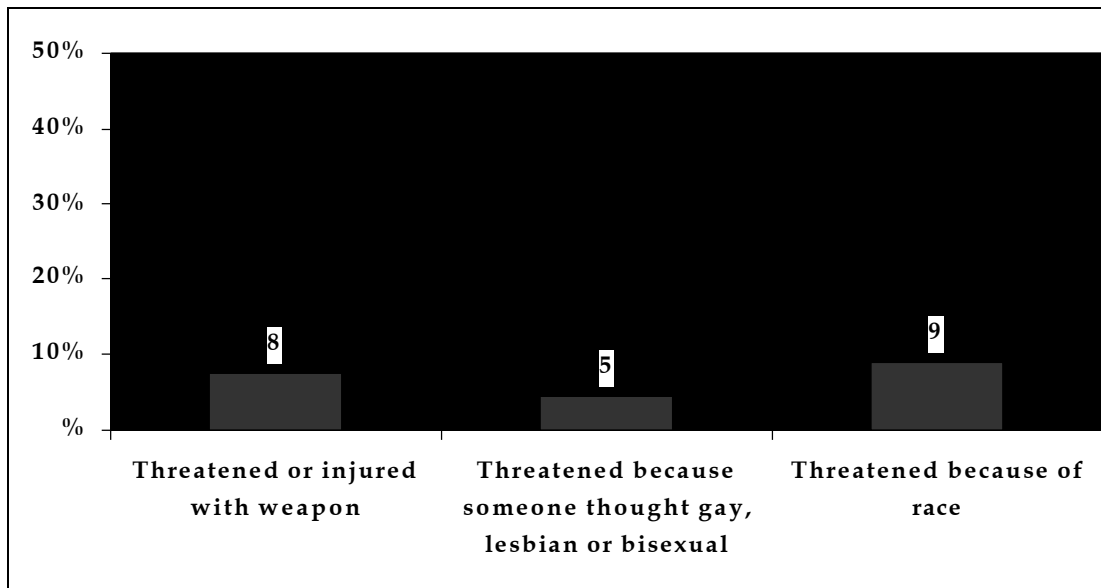
Eighteen percent of students reported carrying a weapon such as a gun, knife, or club anywhere in the past 30 days³. Less than half of these or eight percent of all students said that they carried a gun anywhere in the past 30 days. Six percent reported carrying a weapon on school property in the same time period. Of students who reported carrying a weapon in the past 30 days, 41 percent claimed to carry a weapon for six or more of the past 30 days, 32 percent carried them on two to five days and 27 percent carried them on only one of the past 30 days. This same pattern was also true for students carrying weapons on school property. However, of the students who carried a gun at all in the past 30 days, they seem to do so on fewer days. Twenty percent of students who reported carrying a gun at all in the past 30 days said that they had done so on six or more days in the past 30, 43 percent on two to five days, and 37 percent on only one day.

³ The survey was conducted outside of any hunting season. Therefore students hunting could not explain reports of carrying weapons.

Eight percent of students reported either being threatened or injured with a weapon on school property within the past 12 months (see Figure 1). Four percent said that they had stayed home at least one day in the past 12 months because they felt unsafe either going to school or while at school. Over half of those who had been threatened reported that this had occurred only once while slightly over a quarter reported that this had happened twice or three times. Over one-quarter of all students reported ever being sexually harassed at their school⁴. Nine percent reported having ever been threatened or hurt because of their race. Five percent of students reported having ever been threatened or hurt because someone thought they were gay, lesbian, or bisexual. In general, over half of all students said that they “always” felt safe from physical harm at school, while an additional 42 percent said they “usually” felt safe. Only four percent of students said that they usually did not feel safe at school (see Figure 2). An even larger percentage of students said that they felt safe on their way to and from school. Nearly two-thirds said that they “always” felt safe and nearly a third said that they “usually” felt safe. Again, about four percent reported feeling unsafe on their way to or from school.

Figure 1. Threats

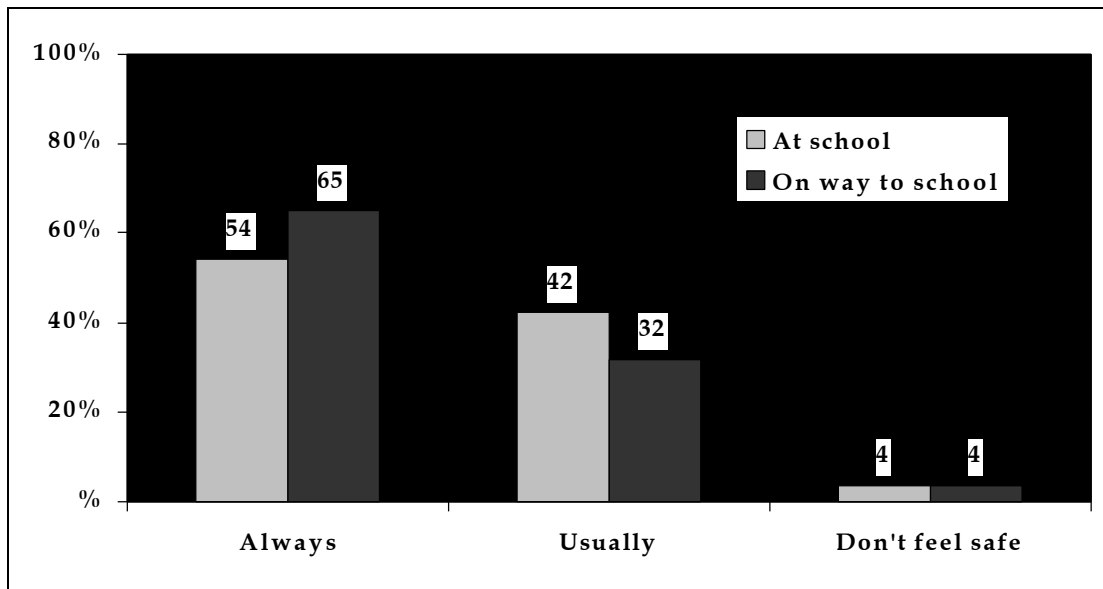
Percentage of all students who reported being threatened at least once (in the past 12 months for weapons; ever for race or gay, lesbian or bisexual threats).



⁴ Students were asked, “Have you ever been ‘sexually harassed,’ however you may define this, at your school?”

Figure 2. Feeling Safe

Percentage of all students by response categories to questions about feeling safe from physical harm at school or on the way to or from school.

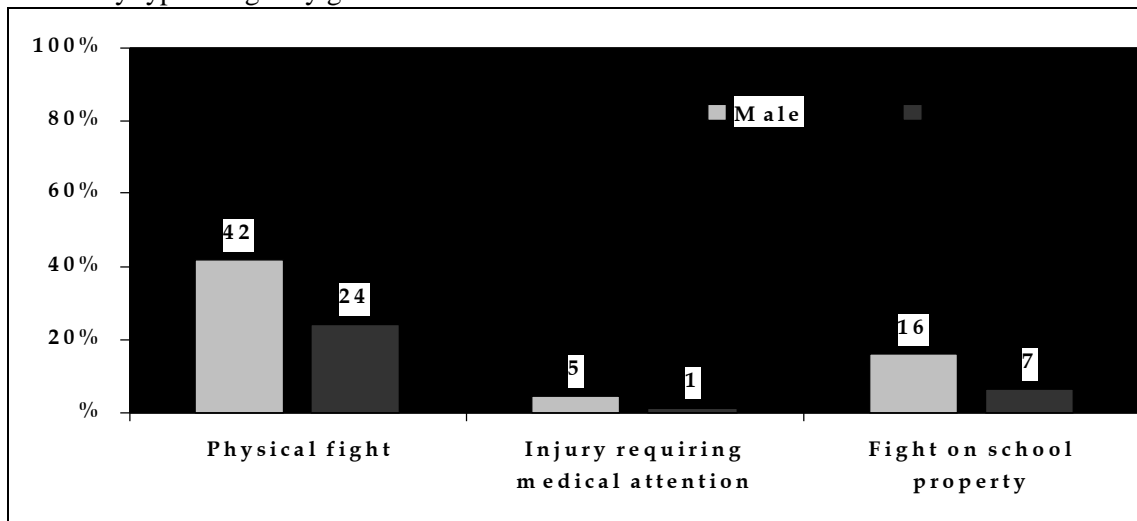


The YRBS also asked a series of questions related to sexual violence. Four percent of students reported ever having verbally or physically forced someone to have sex with them. Ten percent of students reported ever having been verbally or physically forced to take part in sexual activity.

Physical fights appear to be a somewhat common phenomena among high school aged students, though most appear to involve only minor or no injury. Thirty-three percent said that they had been involved in a physical fight at least once in the past 12 months but only three percent said that they had to be treated by a doctor or nurse after a fight (see Figure 3). Slightly less than half of the students who reported being involved in a fight had been involved in only one, while nearly a third said they had been in two or three fights. Eleven percent reported being in a fight on school property. Students were even less likely to be involved in multiple fights on school property. Students were most likely to be involved in fights with friends or family members, accounting for nearly two-thirds of the most recent fights reported by students.

Figure 3. Fighting by Gender

Percentage of all students who reported being involved in a physical fight at least once in the past 12 months by type of fight by gender.



There were significant relationships between fighting, weapons, and feelings of safety. Students who said they always felt safe at school were less likely to have been involved in any fights in the past 12 months than students who “usually” felt safe or students who usually “didn’t feel safe” at school. Similarly, students who “always” or “usually” felt safe were less likely to have carried a weapon in the past 30 days. A similar pattern is found between reports of feeling safe on the way to or from school and fighting and weapons carrying.

As might be expected, there were also significant relationships between threats and feelings of safety. Students who reported feeling “always” or “usually” safe at school were significantly less likely to have reported being threatened or injured with a weapon on school property in the past 12 months. Similarly, students who felt unsafe at school were significantly more likely to have been hurt or threatened because someone thought they were gay, lesbian, or bisexual and to have been threatened or hurt because of their race. Similar patterns were found between having been threatened or injured with a weapon in the past 12 months and having been threatened or hurt because of one’s race or perceived sexuality.

When 1997 National YRBS results and 1999 Wisconsin YRBS results are compared, one significant difference emerges. Students in Wisconsin are less likely to report being in a physical fight on school property one or more times during the past 12 months than the national average (11 percent compared to 15 percent).

Trends

The percentage of students carrying weapons anywhere decreased significantly from 19 percent in 1993 to 15 percent in 1997 but rose again to 18 percent in 1999. The percentage of students who reported carrying guns anywhere within the past 30 days followed a similar trend. However, the percentage of students carrying weapons on school property decreased from nine to six percent. This decrease seems largely due to decreases in the number of male students carrying weapons on school property, which decreased from 15 percent in 1993 to eight percent in 1999. The prevalence among female students remained at about three percent.

There appear to be no significant changes in the percentage of students who had been threatened or injured with a weapon on school property - eight percent in 1993, 1997 and 1999. Yet, there are some indications that violent behavior is on the decline. There was a marginally significant decrease in the percentage of students saying that they stayed home from school because they did not feel safe, decreasing from six to four percent between 1993 and 1999. The percentage of students who reported being in a fight either anywhere or on school property decreased during this same period, from 39 percent to 31 percent anywhere and from 16 percent to 11 percent at school. Of those who reported being in a physical fight, there was no significant change in the number of students who received injuries requiring medical attention as the result of fighting.

While there was no significant change among those who said that they had ever forced someone to take part in sexual activity, there was a slight decrease between 1993 and 1999 among those who said that they had been forced to take part in sexual activity, however this difference was not significant.

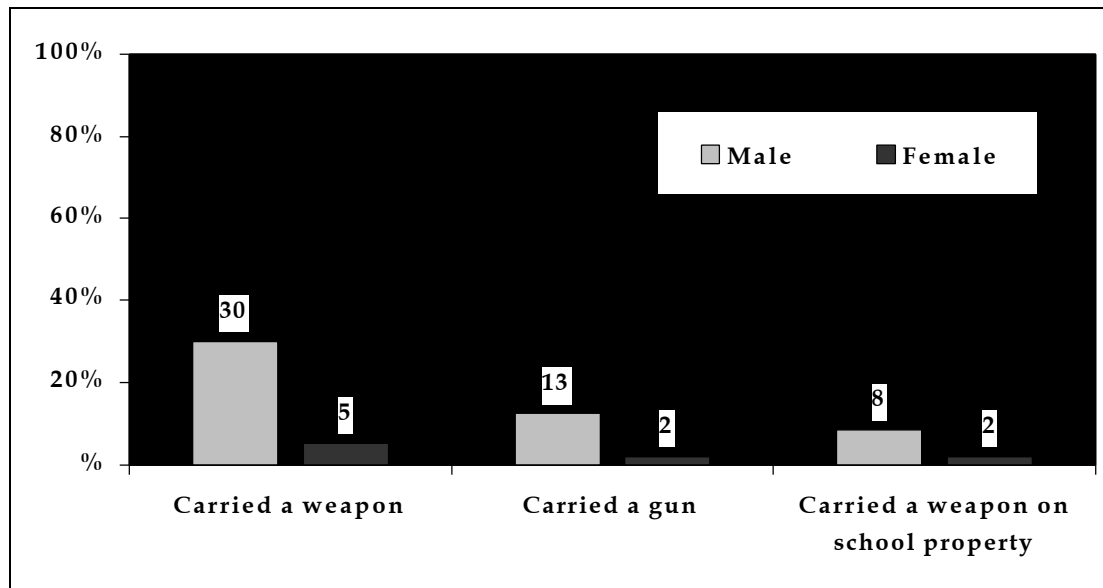
Comparisons by Demographic Groups

Gender

Male students had a significantly higher prevalence rate on nearly every measure of violence and weapon usage (see Figure 4). They were more likely to carry weapons both on school grounds and off, including guns. They were more likely to have been involved in a fight in the past 12 months both on school grounds and off, as well as being more likely to have needed medical treatment as the result of a fight. Male students were twice as likely as female students to report that they had been threatened or hurt because someone thought they were gay, lesbian, or bisexual.

Figure 4. Weapons Carrying by Gender

Percentage of students who carried a weapon at least once in the past 12 months by type of weapon by gender.

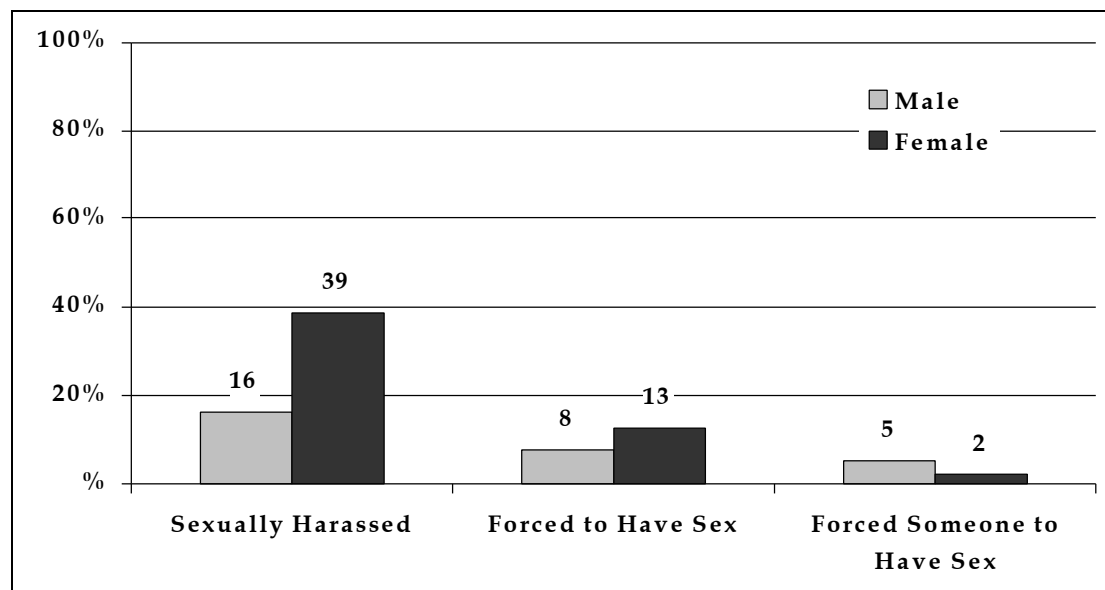


There were also important differences with whom male and female students reported fighting most recently. Most female students who reported ever having fought, reported fighting last with a family member. Nearly half of male students, on the other hand, reported fighting last with a friend or someone they knew compared to less than a third for female students.

Thirty-nine percent of female students reported having been sexually harassed at school compared to only sixteen percent of male students (see Figure 5). Female students were also significantly more likely than male students to report having been verbally or physically forced to have sex. Male students were significantly more likely to have reported ever verbally or physically forcing someone to have sex.

Figure 5. Sexual Violence by Gender

Percentage of students by type of sexual violence by gender.



Male and female students were similar, though, in their feeling of safety. Nearly identical numbers of male and female students reported staying home from school at least once because they felt unsafe. Similarly, though a slightly higher percentage of male students claim that they were threatened with or injured by a weapon on school grounds than female students, this difference did not achieve statistical significance. There was no significant difference in the percentage of male and female students who said they felt unsafe either at school or on their way to and from school.

Grade

Prevalence rates for carrying weapons (including both on and off school grounds, and for carrying guns) are nearly identical across all high school grades. However, those reporting being threatened or injured on school property decrease with grade. Likewise, ninth grade students were significantly more likely than other grades to report staying home because of feeling unsafe. As grade level increases, so do feelings of being physically safe at school and on the way to school. For example, the percentage of students who reported “always” feeling safe at school increased from 41 percent in ninth grade to 64 percent in twelfth grade. Similarly, the percentage who reported “always” feeling safe on their way to and from school increased from 56 percent in ninth grade to 74 percent in twelfth grade. There was a slight decrease in being threatened or injured at school with grade. However, there were no significant differences between grade levels in the percentage of students reporting that they were threatened or hurt because of their race or because someone thought they were gay, lesbian or bisexual.

The difference for those who report forcing someone to have sex increases slightly but significantly by grade. In ninth grade 3 percent report ever forcing someone to have sex, by twelfth grade 4 percent report ever forcing someone to have sex. The percentage of those who report having been forced by someone to take part in sexual activity also increases with grade. This measure begins at 11 percent in the

ninth grade, drops to eight percent in tenth grade, increases to nine percent in eleventh grade and then to 13 percent by the twelfth grade.

There is also a significant statistical difference in the percentage of ninth, tenth, eleventh or twelfth graders who were involved in a fight (both on and off school property) with the percentage dropping as grade level increases. For example, 43 percent of ninth graders reported fighting while 24 percent of twelfth graders reported the same. The percentage requiring medical attention as the result of fighting decreases slightly as grade increases. Especially among male students, involvement in physical fights appears to peak in ninth grade and slowly taper off through twelfth grade, especially on school property.